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Hakala '98, marine biologist, to return to campus as 2009-10 Science and Math Visiting Alumnus

Summary: The Minnesota native has been drawn to the study of whales.

(February 17, 2010)-The 2009-10 Science and Math Visiting Alumnus Siri Hakala '98, biologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Southwest Fisheries Science Center in La Jolla, California, will return to the University of Minnesota, Morris to talk to students and faculty about her graduate experience at the University of Hawaii and share stories about her work. Her presentation, "Whales, Crossbows, and Cardboard Boxes: a Tale of (Continuing) Post-UMM Adventures," at 5:30 p.m. on Monday, March 1, 2010, in the Science Auditorium, is open to the public.

Hakala planned to be a biology major when she arrived on campus as a first-year student, but the St. Paul native didn't anticipate a career involving whales. "I had been torn between biology and psychology," remembers Hakala, "but then read Douglas Adams' book *Last Chance to See*, which described several endangered species on the brink of extinction, but also the lives of the crazy field biologists studying them and thought 'that is the life for me.'"

During her Morris years, Hakala conducted research through the National Science Foundation's Research Experience for Undergraduate program. On a research ship in the Atlantic Ocean, "interest and serendipity" intersected.

"I spent two summers at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science working with a biological oceanographer," she shares. "I was supposed to study mussel growth rates, but my measuring device malfunctioned at sea, and I had two weeks of thumb twiddling in front of me. My internship adviser just looked at me and said, 'You like large animals. Why don't you watch the whales?' And so my senior project was born. I was always a sucker for the 'charismatic megafauna'."

Hakala's first whale-related project that summer examined the correlation between baleen whale presence, as measured by surfacings, and the occurrence of internal waves over an underwater mountain. The internal waves increased benthic productivity, which in turn increased fish activity, which, in theory, drew more whales. "That research project got me into graduate school," she says.

Hakala graduated from the University of Hawaii, Manoa in 2004 with a master of arts in psychology/marine mammal behavior and biology. Her thesis focused on behavioral choices of male humpback whales on the Hawaiian wintering grounds. Since then, she has served as a senior observer for the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary/Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center, as a biological technician for the marine mammal genetics group at Southwest Fisheries Science Center at La Jolla, Calif., and as a research assistant at the Eye of the Whale in Homer, Ala.

"While at UMM, Siri was excited about marine biology, particularly whales," remembers Professor of Biology Van Gooch, "and she made it happen."

In addition to her public presentation, Hakala will also visit Professor of Biology Chris Cole's Conservation Biology class and have lunch with students.

Photo: Siri Hakala

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